



# Sociologia del territorio

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SOCIOLOGIA DEL TERRITORIO





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a cura di  
Gabriele Manella

# Oltre il turismo?

Viaggi e viaggiatori  
nella società del (post)Covid

SOCIOLOGIA DEL TERRITORIO



TURISMO E LOISIR

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## *18. Nova Gorica-Gorizia: New Identities for the European Capital of Culture 2025*

by *Moreno Zago*

In 2025, Nova Gorica (Slovenia) and Gorizia (Italy) has become the European Capital of Culture. Since the challenging years after the World War II, the two cities have always found ways to dialogue, cooperate, and jointly solve problems, thanks in part to the presence of a Slovenian community that played a crucial role in bridging relations with the institutions of what was then Yugoslavia, now Slovenia. Over the past three decades, the intense activity in cross-border cooperation has been an opportunity to promote new modes of interaction and governance. A significant expression of this is the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation Gect/Ezts GO. The surrounding region boasts a wealth of natural, historical-cultural, and linguistic-identity resources. The bid book *GO! Borderless*, for the two cities' candidacy, highlighted the projects supporting its cross-border nature. The main goal of the project is to improve the quality of life for residents by focusing resources on creating a new cultural, tourist, economic, and educational entity, aimed at boosting investments and economic development and attracting tourist groups interested in cultural experiences.

This contribution analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the tourist supply, the sentiment of current and potential tourists, and the opportunity of the event to strengthen the touristic image of the territory and the cities themselves: multilingual, green, young, innovative, and rich in knowledge. First, the contribution attempts to define the meaning of "local cross-border community" and discusses its issues with event management from a tourism perspective, including its current and future identity and sense of belonging.

## 1. The European Capitals of Culture

The European Capital of Culture is an initiative launched by the European Union to showcase the richness and diversity of cultures across Europe. Each year, cities are selected to hold this title for a one-year period, during which they host a multitude of cultural events with a strong European dimension. The initiative, which began in 1985, has grown to become one of Europe's most prominent cultural events, reinforcing the sense of community among Europeans (Kiran, 2013).

This prestigious title has rejuvenated numerous cities by driving redevelopment and expanding cultural offerings, thereby creating lasting benefits for local societies. Each city uses this opportunity to display its unique cultural assets and to forge a lasting impact that transcends the tenure of the title (Lamour *et al.*, 2022; Urbančíková, 2018). For example, Italy has seen several cities designated as European Capitals of Culture, each using the title to showcase its rich cultural heritage and contemporary cultural dynamism, and to promote cultural, social, and economic development: Florence (1986) celebrated its Renaissance art and architecture, reinforcing its status as a key cultural hub; Bologna (2000) highlighted its cultural heritage and contemporary artistic scene; Genoa (2004) merged its rich maritime history with modern culture, which contributed to the city's revitalization and boosted its cultural sectors; Matera (2019) emphasized sustainable tourism and showcased its unique landscape and history through various cultural events and installations. Cities awarded this title not only have the chance to regenerate their areas but also enhance their international image and benefit from increased cultural tourism.

Nova Gorica in Slovenia and Gorizia in Italy, designated as the European Capitals of Culture for 2025, present a unique instance where two geographically proximate and historically intertwined cities from different countries collaborate to host the title. Their joint candidacy highlights significant themes of cross-border cooperation and cultural exchange, demonstrating how culture can bridge national boundaries and foster mutual understanding. Their designation is an excellent opportunity for these cities to enhance their cultural profiles, encourage tourism, and promote a shared cultural identity across the border.

## 2. Gorizia and Nova Gorica

Gorizia and Nova Gorica are two cities that embody the complex history of European borders and cultural identities. Situated at the crossroads

of Italy and Slovenia, their story is a vivid illustration of division and unity, reflecting the broader geopolitical shifts in Europe over the past century (Bellavite, 2024; Gasparini, Zago, 1998; Strizzolo, Zago, 2022).

Historically, Gorizia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, renowned for its picturesque landscapes and as a melting pot of Latin, Slavic, and Germanic cultures. Following World War I and the dissolution of the empire, the Treaty of Saint-Germain (1919) awarded most of the territory to Italy, positioning Gorizia as a crucial border city against the newly formed Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The city's strategic importance continued through World War II, after which the geopolitical landscape dramatically shifted once again. The Paris Peace Treaties of 1947 redrew the borders, placing Gorizia within Italian territory, while Nova Gorica was founded in 1948 on the Yugoslavian side, directly across the new border. This division was emblematic of the Iron Curtain that divided Europe into East and West during the Cold War. Nova Gorica was initially envisioned as a socialist showcase, a new town symbolizing renewal and progress under the Yugoslav regime (Kuzmin, 2006; Medved, Velušček, 2004). Over time, it developed its own identity, distinct yet always intimately connected with Gorizia, as families, friends, and economic life continued to intertwine across the border.

By the 1960s, the Italian-Yugoslav border was known as Europe's most open frontier, and the high volume of traffic greatly improved relations between the two neighbouring nations (Gubert, 1972). This era was marked by the collaborative efforts of the mayors of Gorizia and Nova Gorica, Michele Martina and Jožko Štrukelj, who in 1967 were invited to Berlin by Willy Brandt to discuss their joint initiatives – a testament to their effective cooperation (Fornasir, 2020). A way of working together that has also characterised subsequent administrations, sometimes to solve problems linked to local contingencies but increasingly to give voice to wide-ranging territorial cooperation, made up of innovative projects in all sectors of science, governance, health, the economy, tourism, the enhancement and protection of the cultural and natural heritage, mobility, etc. The 1960s also saw the founding of the Institute for Central European Cultural Encounters (1966) and the Institute of International Sociology in Gorizia (1968), later joined by the Slovene Research Institute (1974-76). The fall of the Iron Curtain and Slovenia's accession to the European Union in 2004 marked a significant turning point for both cities. The Schengen Agreement (2007) facilitated the removal of border controls, allowing for easier movement of people and goods.

Gorizia and Nova Gorica epitomize the concept of border cities, which are characterized by their placement on the boundaries of national fron-

tiers, presenting unique challenges and opportunities. Border cities often face issues related to governance, as differing laws and regulations across borders can complicate administration, economic activity, and daily life (Schultz, 2021). Today, Gorizia and Nova Gorica present a specific case of two cities in two different countries, living side by side, yet gradually stitching together their urban fabric and cultural life. Joint cultural projects and social initiatives are common, aiming to foster a sense of shared community and regional identity. The cities co-host events, share public services, and collaborate in various sectors from education to transportation, effectively functioning as a single European city.

The creation of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (Gect/Ezts GO) in 2011 among Gorizia, Nova Gorica, and Šempeter-Vrtojba has further facilitated dialogue and collaboration, enabling more streamlined and effective cooperation across borders (Aa.Vv., 2018). It is a legal entity created under European Union law to facilitate and promote cross-border, transnational, or interregional cooperation (Regulation Ec n. 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council and in the amendments introduced by Regulation (Ec) n. 1302/2013). These groupings are designed to enable regional and local authorities and other public bodies from different EU member States to work together on shared projects and services across national borders.

The primary purpose of a Egtc is to overcome legal and administrative barriers that can hinder cooperation across borders. By having its own legal personality, a Egtc can manage projects, own property, employ staff, and ensure legal and financial management of cross-border cooperation initiatives. The creation of a Egtc is encouraged by the EU to strengthen cohesion between European regions, improve citizens' quality of life, and make territorial cooperation more effective and oriented towards concrete results. For the Ecoc, the Gect/Ezts GO will invest more than €8 million to finance projects, events and initiatives that will last until 2026 and beyond, attracting both the public and investors, plus an additional €70 million from the Slovenian Government and €130 million by the Autonomous Region Friuli Venezia Giulia only for Gorizia and the surrounding territory aimed at re-developing the castle area, improving access to the city, enhancing bicycle routes, upgrading public spaces, expanding parking facilities, etc.

### **3. GO! Borderless**

The designation of Nova Gorica and Gorizia as the European Capital of Culture for 2025 is a testament to their successful collaboration and

mutual enrichment. This title is seen as an opportunity to showcase their unique cultural landscape, which harmoniously blends Italian and Slovene influences, and to model the possibilities of cross-border cooperation and cultural exchange. Their story is not just about geographical proximity but is deeply rooted in the resilience and adaptability of their people, who have navigated the challenges of political changes and border dynamics (Valussi, 2000). It highlights the power of cultural and community ties in overcoming divisions, symbolizing a bridge between nations and cultures in modern Europe. The announcement of Gorizia and Nova Gorica winning the title in December 2020 came at a time of painful separation experienced by the two cities due to the new barriers erected by the authorities to contain the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic.

Under the motto “GO! Borderless”, the cities plan to embody this prestigious title through storytelling, intertwining memories of the past with visions of a friendly future, while building an effective cultural strategy to sustainably improve the quality of life of the entire frontier zone. The epicentre of the events will be the Europe Square, the square of the two Goricas since 2004, successfully representing the cohabitation of cultures along the frontier. The planned activities aim to revitalize urban spaces, explore the common heritage of the frontier, and acquire knowledge in the field of cultural production, which is, in its essence, limitless and boundless, resonating with the fundamental values of European culture. Over 600 cultural events are set to take place in 2025, along with more than 60 projects.

The GO!2025 bid book for the candidacy of Nova Gorica-Gorizia outlines strategic objectives that include: establishing a cultural and creative centre with a shared system for transborder cultural production; revitalizing cultural heritage sites and modernizing transborder heritage; creating a strong cultural tourism model for the region with a unified brand; and positioning Nova Gorica as an innovative city where culture becomes the main force for the development of the border area (Aa.Vv., 2020).

The proponents intend for these aims to translate into a transborder conurbation – a green, vital, sustainable city open to Europe and the world, dynamic and entrepreneurial. A city aimed at creating and maintaining a pleasant, happy, and creative environment for its citizens and a lighthouse of solidarity and collaboration beyond every kind of border (*ibidem*).

The intention is to reverse the course of economic decline:

- by activating a new cultural ecosystem that rests on the values of conurbative development, in an international, multilingual, and innovative cultural climate with original thinking;
- capable of building a solid ground for regional development plans and related international calls, developing tourism, and a shared city brand;

- leaving a legacy of a transborder European city made up of Nova Gorica and Gorizia, green, vibrant, and with a high quality of life, innovative and with an entrepreneurial spirit, uniting in a platform for all types of innovation, art with technology, culture, and economy, and promoting cultural entrepreneurship with European and international links (*ibidem*).

#### **4. Tourism in the Area and the Benchmarking Analysis: How It Went in Other Cultural Capitals**

The towns of Gorizia and Nova Gorica are situated within an hour's drive from a significant number of tourist attractions, including six Unesco sites, several art cities, and destinations for active or slow tourism (itineraries in contact with nature, cycling routes, food, and wine). This strategic location makes them an ideal base for exploring an extended area, which becomes more attractive as the area offers good connections for daily visits to destinations of greatest interest and conveys strategic location as a factor of tourist attractiveness.

Total arrivals in the province of Gorizia are approximately 450 thousand (1,779 thousand overnight stays), while in Nova Gorica they are about 87 thousand (176 thousand overnight stays). For both areas, the foreign presence exceeds 70%. As far as the province of Gorizia is concerned, incoming tourism is mainly from abroad, with a concentration in the famous seaside resort of Grado, amounting to 70%. Moreover, there is a strong seasonality, with 90% of attendances concentrated between June and September. Even though the accommodation offer in the city of Gorizia alone is evaluated positively by reviewers, it is inadequate in terms of total capacity and the level of offer to welcome large flows of visitors arriving in the city on the occasion of GO!2025. The wide provincial and regional offer present can, in part, make up for the lack of accommodation facilities in Gorizia. From the point of view of sentiment analysis, the destination "Collio and Gorizia" receives very positive ratings in terms of overall (accessibility, organization, availability, etc.) and individual perception (gastronomic, physical, naturalistic, artistic experience, etc.) and quality of services (guide services, organization of events, catering services, typical products, staff) (Camera di Commercio Venezia Giulia-Uniontrasporti, 2022).

The analysis of the trend of post-event flows of the previous European Capitals of Culture shows how in many cases, the long wave of the event and its media resonance are not by themselves sufficient conditions to

maintain consistent (and growing) tourist flows in the long term (Falk, Hagsten, 2017; Garcia, Cox, 2013; Mavrin, 2024). Generally, the literature does not provide clear evidence of individual elements that are able to attract tourism specifically to a Capital of Culture. The increase in tourist arrivals and presences may depend on a variety of factors including cost, destination cultural supply, accessibility of area. The studies show that hosting the European Capital of Culture, although leading to an average increase in overnight stays of 8% during the year of the event, does not stimulate tourist demand in subsequent years. Arrivals and presences grow in the year of Ecoc, but the increase is not such as to be able on its own to trigger a process of economic and social development.

On the basis of a number of cases analysed, it emerges that the cities that have succeeded in translating the short-term “boost” effect of Ecoc into interesting but sustainable tourist numbers in subsequent years are those that have developed a specific strategy of territorial development and promotion, and the implementation of specific events. For this organization to have long-term effects, however, it is not enough to aim at increasing the number of tourists, overnight stays, and the length of stay but tourists must be offered new types of experiences that also involve them on an emotional level, moving from a traditional tourist offer to a model of experiential tourism through which tourists do not just visit places but interact with people, experience history and traditions in search of activities with a strong personal, spiritual, social, and intellectual impact. It is therefore necessary for the territory to work on its distinctive skills, both to respond to the needs of thematic and/or more niche tourism, and to offer a proposal suited to the new ‘long tourism’ trends, also by leveraging the territory’s high quality of life to attract digital nomads and holidaymakers.

## **5. Challenges in Integration**

The projects implemented by the two cities have not only enhanced the territory but also created networks of cooperation among economic, cultural, institutional, and citizen operators, thereby developing a sense of belonging to a wider area than just their “backyard”.

One of the objectives of the two cities is to strengthen the common sense of belonging to the cross-border area, thanks to the Ecoc events. The “practice” of the border, that is, the ease with which one decides to cross a border and “experience” what lies beyond, creates the preconditions for the development of a cross-border identity where what lies beyond the border is no longer seen as a foreign and fearful land but as a space made up of

places in which one can feel at home. By projecting outwards and thus towards partial or total openness with the neighbouring system, borders have become increasingly penetrable and irrelevant, giving rise to a cross-border space that fosters that cross-border identity mentioned above. In the past, the practice of the border consisted mainly of small trade and leisure opportunities. Today, it has matured into collaborations between public institutions, companies, associations, and ethnic-linguistic communities. These collaborations encompass macro-interests that concern strategic choices for the area: the management of ports, road and logistical structures, the environment, and the coordinated image of the Upper Adriatic, whose impacts have positive repercussions on economic operators and citizens.

Recent research (Zago, 2019) indicates that people living along the borders exhibit a strong cosmopolitan feeling, expressing a positive attitude towards cross-border locations (about one in three residents). Border towns have become a meeting point for different economies and cultures (fairly-very much agree, 72%), with a significant percentage of the population agreeing that this has enabled different ethnic groups to coexist and created a culture of tolerance (61%). Ethnic-linguistic minority communities are perceived as an important element of identity, strategic in creating strong links with border cities. Indeed, an important role in the creation of links between the two cities has been played by the Slovene community in Gorizia. Numerous economic and cultural organizations of the Slovene minority in Gorizia interface with European, state, and local institutions both in Italy and in Slovenia, and their presence is also manifested through the press, radio, television, and schools of all levels – tools that contribute to the preservation and diffusion of the Slovene language and identity in the territory (Bogatec, Vidau 2016; Bufon, 2019; Marušič, 2007). The community of Italians considers the Slovene community an important element of identity (57% to the fairly-very much agree), strategic in creating strong links with the city of Nova Gorica (47%) and in the dialogue with the Italian community (45%), with the conviction that also in the future, the two communities will continue to act in a climate of collaboration (65%).

The abolition of border controls has also been an advantage for cross-border mobility. For more than 40% of the sample, the abolition of controls had a positive impact on their cross-border travel habits. That is, it was an incentive to take advantage of the opportunities that the border territory could offer. Slovenia's accession to the European Union (2004) and later to the Schengen area (2007) brought benefits. The opening of borders has had a very positive impact on consumption for everyday needs (68%) and on business and entrepreneurial activities (48%), on opportunities for study (47%), and work (46%).

## 6. Cross-Border Sense of Belonging

A previous study (Sessa *et al.*, 2021) and a World Café held in 2023 with students from my course in Cross-border Relations and Local Development at the Master's degree in Diplomacy and International Cooperation at Gorizia and from Nova Gorica focused on strengthening the sense of cross-border belonging, particularly among young people. This event highlighted several key freedoms affecting quality of life and the sense of belonging, illustrating both opportunities and challenges faced by residents:

- students frequently crossing between Italy and Slovenia do not view the border as a barrier, experiencing the area as a cohesive space (Freedom of living the space “other”);
- living near permeable borders provides varied economic opportunities for residents of both countries, though disparities in wages and purchasing power influence consumer behaviour (Satisfying personal life needs);
- key challenges include improving public transport links and managing rising housing costs driven by tourism. While the elimination of border controls has eased travel delays, the lack of integrated cross-border public transport systems still makes non-car travel challenging, underscoring the need for better coordinated transport infrastructure to support both daily commuting and tourism (Mobility across borders);
- strengthening cross-border economic ties in sectors such as eco-tourism, local food production, and cultural activities, along with synchronized labour policies, could expand job prospects, especially for the youth. Integrating these markets can also drive-up demand for cross-border cultural events and foster growth through educational and research collaborations (Personal Development and Flourishing);
- Italian students are keen to learn Slovene, and Slovenians are similarly motivated to learn Italian, recognizing that language proficiency is key to overcoming cultural barriers (Linguistic Inclusivity);
- enhancing multilingual training programs and boosting cross-border civic engagement are crucial for nurturing the coexistence of diverse identities and cultures (Enhanced Identity and Civic Participation);
- collaborative management of environmental resources across the border can help tackle issues like climate change and pollution, which affect the region universally (Environmental Health and Sustainability).

These findings highlight the complex interplay of economic, social, and environmental factors in cross-border regions, emphasizing the need for integrated policies and collaborative efforts to enhance the living conditions and identity of the border communities. Furthermore, from the point of

view of the advantages and disadvantages that the event could have on the cross-border territory, it emerged that:

Advantages of hosting the European Capital of Culture:

- the Ecoc event provides cities with the opportunity to showcase and revitalize their cultural heritage. This often involves the restoration of historical sites, development of new cultural facilities, and promotion of local arts and traditions (Cultural Revitalization);
- Ecoc greatly increases cities' international profile. This visibility can attract future investments and events, and it often leads to sustained tourism growth even after the designated year (International Visibility);
- Ecoc leads to a surge in visitors, which boosts local tourism and related businesses. This increased footfall can provide significant economic benefits to the hospitality sector, including hotels, restaurants, and shops (Increased Tourism);
- the influx of tourists and the development of cultural infrastructure can create new jobs and stimulate the local economy. This may include both direct employment opportunities in tourism and culture, as well as indirect job creation through related services and industries (Economic Development and Job Creation);
- many cities use the Ecoc as an opportunity to regenerate and redevelop urban areas. This can lead to improved infrastructure, enhanced public spaces, and better quality of life for residents (Urban Regeneration);
- the preparations and festivities associated with the Ecoc can foster a stronger sense of community pride and cohesion. Residents often participate in the cultural activities, which can improve social bonds and civic pride (Community Pride and Cohesion).

Disadvantages of hosting the European Capital of Culture:

- while the Ecoc can bring short-term economic benefits, these may not always be sustainable in the long term. Some cities struggle to maintain the momentum and the facilities created for the event (Short-Term Focus);
- there can be a diversion of resources from other needy areas of cities development to focus on Ecoc activities. This might lead to neglect of long-term urban planning and investment in broader city needs (Resource Allocation);
- the regeneration projects and influx of tourists can lead to gentrification. Rising property values and living costs may displace long-term residents, altering the social fabric of neighbourhoods (Gentrification and Displacement);
- while enhancing cultural offerings is a core goal, there can be too much focus on appealing to international tourists at the expense of lo-

cal needs and culture, potentially leading to commercialization of local traditions (Cultural Overemphasis);

- the sudden increase in tourists can strain local transport systems and public services, potentially leading to overcrowding and lower quality of service for residents (Pressure on Local Infrastructures).

In conclusion, while hosting the European Capital of Culture can offer significant benefits and opportunities for a city, it also requires careful planning and management to mitigate potential downsides and ensure that the positive impacts are sustainable beyond the event year (Tab. 1) (Veselinovič, Škrbić Alempjević, 2023).

*Tab. 1 - Swot analysis of Ecoc GO! 2025 for local residents*

<p><i>Strengths</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Freedom of living the space “other”</li> <li>– Satisfying personal life needs</li> <li>– Linguistic inclusivity</li> <li>– Community pride and cohesion</li> <li>– Cultural revitalization</li> <li>– Urban regeneration</li> <li>– International visibility</li> </ul>	<p><i>Weaknesses</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Mobility across borders not well supported</li> <li>– Over short-term focus</li> <li>– Unbalanced resource allocation</li> <li>– Cultural overemphasis</li> <li>– Pressure on local infrastructures</li> </ul>
<p><i>Opportunities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Personal development and flourishing</li> <li>– Enhanced identity and civic participation</li> <li>– Educational and research collaborations</li> <li>– Economic development and job creation</li> <li>– Long-term tourism growth</li> <li>– Sustainable infrastructure development</li> <li>– Increasing tourism</li> </ul>	<p><i>Risks and threats</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Rising housing costs</li> <li>– Gentrification and displacement</li> <li>– Economic disparities</li> <li>– Environmental challenges because of increased tourism and urban expansion</li> <li>– Dependence on external factors</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

The year of Nova Gorica and Gorizia as the European Capital of Culture represents a unique opportunity to rethink the urban context: modern, smart, and accessible, with a focus on digital services, social and environmental sustainability, and the ability to enjoy cultural heritage. The Ecoc year is also significant to enhance the external perception of Goricas, to support the growth of new entrepreneurship, to stimulate social involvement, and to foster a sense of territorial belonging.

The success of this year as the European Capital of Culture will largely depend on how effectively Nova Gorica and Gorizia can work to

not only increase tourist inflow but also to solidify a vision of territorial development. It is hoped that the two administrations will seize the opportunity presented by the GO! Borderless 2025 event and with the new European cross-border programming to develop a vision, if not of a common city – a somewhat utopian idea barring some geopolitical reconfiguration – at least of a conurbated city (Gasparini, 2021). The cross-border territory represents a laboratory for research and experimentation for forms of collaboration between different realities in terms of culture, ethnicity, and economic and administrative affiliations, which must be valued but also supported with the development of a feeling of cross-border belonging, a ‘common feeling’ for a shared territory that is still lacking. What still needs to be worked on is the consolidation of a stable and widespread border culture that shapes local identity. This means feeling something different and original compared to others, a sense of identity that is distinctive and enriching.

This is the direction in which future studies should focus in order to understand how culture can become an engine for regenerating the identity of a community that perceives itself as cross-border and what the different mechanisms that strengthen the sense of belonging, social cohesion and economic growth can be. The enhancement of the common historical and cultural heritage also through digital innovation for the creation of a shared identity, the promotion of cultural diversity as a stimulus for intercultural dialogue, active participation in cultural events, workshops and art laboratories for the strengthening of social cohesion, the implementation of cross-border cultural projects as an instrument of local diplomacy, the development of tourism as an opportunity for new generations to remain in the area thus become the partial suggestions to regenerate the identity of a cross-border community, creating connections between people, enhancing the common heritage and promoting sustainable and inclusive development.

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